Indian and Arabic Classical Folktales: A Comparative Study of the Dictates of Conscience

(With Special Reference to Indian Folk Tales:

Panchatantra

Jataka tales

Akbar Birbal

Tenali Raman

Vikram Betal

Singhassan Battissi

A Selection of Oral Tales from Twenty-Two Languages, Folktales from India

Here Comes Holi: The Festival of Colours

Arabic Folktales:

The Arabian Nights

Hatim)

Synopsis For

The Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

(2016)

Submitted to

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Dayalbagh Educational Institute

(Deemed University)

Dayalbagh Agra

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"Too often does reason deceive us; we have only too good a right to doubt her; but conscience never deceives us; she is the true guide of man; it is to the soul what instinct is to the body; he who obeys his conscience is following nature and he need not fear that he will go astray… Let us obey the call of nature; we shall see that her yoke is easy and that when we give heed to her voice we find a joy in the answer of a good conscience" (Rousseau 1921 [1762:252]).

Folk literature is also called folklore or oral tradition of cultures having no written language. It is transmitted by word of mouth medium and consists, as does written literature, of both prose and verse narratives. Folk literature includes poems and songs, myths and dramas, epics, fables, folk tales, rituals, proverbs, riddles passed down orally through the generations. The authors of traditional literature are usually unknown or unidentifiable. Oral literature compared with written literature has many distinct features of its own. It is a spontaneous outburst of the innermost feelings which emerge from the unconscious mind of the community. It is ingrained in tradition and is preserved in memory. Therefore, Oral literature is ever fresh and ever on the move like a river. All literature, oral or written, springs from life, but oral literature is a better projection of the innermost recesses of the social and cultural life of a society, its traditions, customs, habits, behaviour, rites, etc.

The most obvious characteristics of folk literature is its orality. In spite of certain borderline cases, it normally stands in direct contrast to written literature. The latter

exists in manuscripts and books and may be preserved exactly the way the author or the authors have left the written work, even though this may have happened centuries or even millennia ago. Through these manuscripts and books the thoughts and the emotions, the observations and even the fine nuances of style can be experienced without regard to time and distance. In the case of the oral literature it is not possible. The oral literature is concerned only with listening, speaking and singing and with the listening, thus depending upon the existence of a living culture to carry on a tradition. Thus, if any item of folk literature ceases to exist within human memory, it is completely lost.

Folk literature is a part of what is generally known as folklore, customs and beliefs, ritualistic behaviour, dances, folk music, and other non-literary manifestations. These are often considered as a part of the larger study of ethnology and also the business of the folklorist. Folk literature is found everywhere, though the emphasis differs from place to place. Major forms of folk literature is present such as folk songs, implies the use of music, and the musical tradition that varies greatly from one area to another. A folk song can be described as a traditional music of unknown authorship, which is transmitted by the medium of orality, such as, Indian folk music is diverse because of India's vast cultural diversity. It has many forms including bhangra, lavani, dandiya and Rajasthani.

Folk drama is another type of folk literature belonging to the oral literature. Dances, many of them elaborate, with masks portraying animal or human characters, and sometimes containing speeches or songs, are to be found in many parts of the pre-literate world. Folk dramas have grown over the centuries and are a part of the life and culture of the rural people. Folk plays in the form of songs, dances and dramas have nourished a rich tradition. Though many of these have now become extinct and some are languishing, the rural folk have preserved and fostered quite a few folk-plays, such as *Ram Leela, Rasaleela, Prahlad Natak, Bharat Leela, Moghul Tamsha, Suanga* and *RathYatra.*

Fables are another form of folk literature, such as the famous Aesop cycle with animals acting according to their real natures, or those from India, where animals simply act as men and women. A number of these are told by story tellers in many parts of the world with appropriate morals. Similarly, every culture has a collection of wise sayings also known as Proverbs offer some guidelines to live life properly. On the other hand, a riddle is a type of poetry that describes something without actually naming what it is, leaving the reader to guess. It is a light hearted type of poetry which involves the reader.

The folk tale is a story passed down verbally from one generation to another. Each story teller added something new to the existing stories, making them more interesting and fascinating as the ages passed. The different folk tales bear the characteristics of the culture, folklore and customs of the society from which they have originated. Folk tales are not just mere stories. They contain the standards of what is good and what is wrong. They represent the shared views of the moral statements of the community.

The most obvious and distinct characteristic of folk literature is its orality. In spite of certain borderline cases, it normally stands in direct contrast to written literature. The latter exists in manuscripts and books and may be preserved exactly the way the author has left the written work, even though this may have happened centuries or even millennia ago. Through these manuscripts and books the thoughts and the emotions and the observations and even the fine nuances of style can be experienced without regard to time and distance. In the case of oral literature, it is not possible. Oral literature is concerned only with listening, speaking and singing and with the listening, thus depending upon the existence of a living culture to carry on a tradition. Thus, if any item of folk literature ceases to exist within human memory, it is may be completely lost.

The speaker or the singer carries on a tradition learned from other speakers and delivered to a living audience. It may well be that the listeners have heard this material many times before and that it has a vigorous life in the community, and if acceptable to the listeners, the story or song or proverb or riddle will be repeated over and over again as long as it appeals to men and women, even through the ages and over long geographic distances.

"These tales, without exception, express the truth that justice triumphs in the end. They all contain the idea that it is worthwhile to fight for the truth, in any situation. In the fight man is assisted by more powerful beings than ordinary mortals. And the triumph of justice is the only sense and consolation in this world. Indeed, the world itself started out with this hope. The human race received it long, long ago as a cradle-song" (Gyula Illyes, *Once Upon a Time: Forty Hungarian Folk-Tales*).

Interestingly, children are allured and overwhelmed by folk tales. Their popularity springs from imaginative characters, supernatural elements, their focus on action and simple sense of justice. They possess an appeal to the unconscious assimilation of these values by means of narration and role play. Therefore, folk tales are recognized as a source of learning for children. Historically, the development of storytelling goes back to the times when societies were being formed. For millennia, stories have moulded children's character by carrying many social, moral and cultural values in the form of literature.

It is crucial for children to learn about their own cultural heritage and the cultures of others because, "developing positive attitudes toward our culture and the cultures of others is necessary for both social and personal development" (Norton, p.3).

Therefore, literature in written form helps in preserving the folklores and oral traditions. Literature also helps to highlight the relevance of the stories of the past to the

generation of the present, something which is difficult for the oral traditions to uphold strongly.

"For most of human history, literature, both fiction and poetry, has been narrated, both written- heard, not read. So fairy tales, folk tales, stories from the oral traditions, are all of them the most vital connection we have with the imaginations of the ordinary men and women whose labor created our world" (Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*).

The folklores and folk tales have been an eternal part of every culture since ages. A folk tale is a traditional story which is originally passed on orally by the people living in a community. Folk is a term used for the people in general forming the community. When it comes to folk tales in India, the country of diverse religions, languages and cultures, they have a complete range of tales and short stories. Indian folklore has a wide range of stories, myths and legends emerging from all walks of life. Being full of moral values, Indian folklore makes perfect stories for children, and develop a sense of right and wrong. All these ancient stories have been passed down from one generation to the other generation, creating a bond of traditional values with the present-day generation.

There is a fine line that draws the difference between folktales and myths. Many similar genres like legends and fairy tales among others come in between them. Nevertheless, all of these have become a part of customary storytelling that both fascinate and frighten the young and the old. It has been derived from the Greek term "mythos", which is translated as "story". A myth uses concepts like triumph, tragedy, honour, bravery, and foolishness. A piece of literature pertaining to mythology is either legendary or tradition-based. Myths have deep symbolisms that tell some piece of truth for those who listen and convey them. Although it is not an entirely real occurrence or happening, some myths may

have been influenced by real accounts, but these have been remade to become more symbolic with time or location shifts. Because of the nature of myths, they have been used to clarify or enlighten the folks about certain phenomena like, the universal beginning of time, and the existence of other non-worldly supernatural creatures. Myths have also survived for thousands of years because of their deep cultural links owing to which their meanings have been refined further.

Folk tales are similar to popular stories of local folks which are handed down from generation to generation through oral spoken means. As such, the original author is unknown, and many variations in the folktales have occurred because of the interpretations that have been injected per oral transmission otherwise, known as folklores, folk tales encompass many other literatures like, fairy tales, fables, ghost stories, urban legends, etc. Like myths, folk tales may be based on some truth that has been hidden or lost with the passing of time. Because of their almost similar nature, myths and folktales tend to overlap one another. Nevertheless, it is not actually the realism of myths and folk stories, that makes them important but the invaluable lessons or messages they impart to the folks.

Most myths have something that takes place at the beginning of time itself before the start of actual history. Myths often highlight how individuals should treat one another and often have a religious inclination as compared to folk tales. Myths are usually bigger in scope as most of their subjects deal with the functioning of the world (i.e. why these things happen, or how the earth is formed, and other natural phenomena). Myths include the stories of gods. They are the central characters unlike a folk tale in which the common folk or no superhuman being is the main focus.

Each community has its own body of myths which are the products of its primitive beliefs and culture. Myths being an inseparable part of the religious tradition are

closely related to rituals. Most of the myths prevalent are concerned with origin and life of gods, goddesses, demons and other supernatural beings. Some myths grew up by way of explanation of some natural and cosmological phenomena, and in the process, established certain rites and practices. Myths were created out of the need for humans to know about the beginning of everything and the need to know about the workings of the world and the origin of humanity whereas folk tales were created by the folk.

Indian Literature, compared to any other literature in the world, has played a dominant role in the preservation and the propagation of oral traditions and folklores. India is the genesis of all art forms, such as, folk music and epics of India like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, *Panchatantra Tales* to *Jataka Tales* of Buddhism and the *Hitopadesha* from the Medieval Period, in almost all the main languages of India. Scholars, saints, and writers have kept the oral traditions and folk tales alive by writing down many a tale.

The *Panchatantra* is a legendary collection of short stories of fables and magic tales from India. Originally, the *Panchatantra* was composed in the 2nd century B.C. The purpose behind its composition was to implant moral values and governing skills in the young sons of the King. These stories communicate the essence of diplomacy, relationships, politics and administration.

The *Jataka tales* are supposed to have been composed between 300 B.C. and 500 A.D. to disseminate knowledge and morality to mankind. Originally written in Pali language, *Jataka Buddhist tales* have been translated into different languages around the world. The luminous fables of the *Jataka Tales* are intended to impart values of self-sacrifice, morality and honesty.

The minds of young children are clean slates. Childhood experiences and knowledge create an everlasting impression on their delicate minds. Written in a witty, lucid,

attractive style, and a well-structured language, these stories not only give children an immense pleasure of reading but also enrich their minds with moral and social values. These tales contribute towards shaping a strong moral mindset of young children.

A collection of tales with historical perspective like *Akbar Birbal, Tenali Raman, Vikram Betal, Singhassan Battisi* serve the noble and genuine purpose of imparting information about their culture along with instilling moral understanding in the reader.

Akbar Birbal is a collection of stories of the Mughal King Akbar and one of his famous courtiers Birbal who was very witty and had great presence of mind. He was so quick and prompt in his reply to any question of the King that the King was always left speechless. With the time, Birbal became his most trusted courtier and advisor. Thus the stories inform the readers about the life of people in Akbar's kingdom and also give a sense of moral understanding and accurate perception to follow the right path in any adverse circumstances.

Tenali Raman is a collection of stories about Krishnadeva Raya, the ruler of Vijayanagar, and one of his courtiers Tenali Raman. Tenali Raman was a very clever and witty person. Like the stories of *Akbar and Birbal,* the stories of *Tenali Raman* have also become a part of our folklore. These stories are so popular that people of all ages like them and with the time, their popularity has increased even more. These stories have enduring qualities. The character of Tenali Raman not only entertains the reader with his witty, repartee and dexterity but it also enlightens the reader with his wisdom and honesty and also reflects the moral behaviour which should be conducted for the upliftment of humankind. The life of the people of Vijayanagar of that time is also reflected in these stories. Thus these stories also have a historical value.

Vikram and Betal Stories or *Betal Pachisi* written nearly 2,500 years ago are spellbinding stories told to the wise King Vikramaditya by the wily ghost Betal. Each story ends with a riddle and the King Vikramaditya being the wisest, the most noble and virtuous man with excellent skills, has to give a moral to each story which was narrated to him by the ghost Betal.

Singhasan Battisi is a collection of Indian folk tales. The title literally means thirty-two tales of the throne. The thirty-two tales tells about the deeds and adventures of King Vikramaditya and his bravery, virtues, wit and wisdom.

A Selection of Oral Tales from Twenty-two Languages, Folktales from India another set of folk stories selected and edited by AK Ramanujan, is a collection of hundred and ten stories translated into English from different languages. These tales carry a moral for teaching the skill of life and inculcating ethical values along with enjoyment which one can derive after reading the tales that are full of wit and wisdom. The tales also enhance the process of shaping the cognitive mind frame of children which will facilitate them in taking the right decisions.

Here Comes Holi: the Festival of Colours is the story of a young prince Prahlad and king Hirnakasypu. The story brings out the fun and festivity of Holi with its mythical significance.

India remains one of the world's richest sources of folk tales. Folk literature is not merely a carrier of culture or philosophical vision, but rather an expression of self-reflections, deep insight, simple life, and the path of righteousness contained in traditions.

Similar to India, the Arabic world abounds with legends, folk tales, and myths which reflect the cultural history, social customs, morals, values and religious beliefs. The

Arabic folk tales are a source of entertainment, moral lessons and a commentary on religious customs, similar to its counterpart such as the Indian folk tales.

These composites are rich in detail, clear in delivery, smooth in translation, presented with apparent ease. These folk tales have a richly descriptive background and information on the Arab world. The Arabic folk tales bring together stories from a variety of Arab countries and social groups within these countries. They carefully reflect the notion of honour which pervades the Arab tribal society. This complex system of values is often romanticized by the Arabs and revered as the quintessence of their civilization.

The Arabic tales embody many characteristics. The stories reflect the social values that the Arabs have in common and discuss the position and roles of men and women in society. Faith in God is usually expressed through the hero, who uses his belief to achieve the main task. An all powerful King is also depicted and the presence of the supernatural elements is a very important component of most Arabic tales and legends. Since the tribal structure was the nucleus of social and political life for a very long period in Arabic history, the values of such a culture influenced the folktales and legends. Very often, hospitality and kindness to guests and strangers is essential for survival in the desert. Attributes, such as, courage, honesty, honour, hospitality, generosity, and loyalty are emphasized. The hero is defined by characteristics, such as, self-respect, bravery in war, protecting the weak, and helping the poor.

An Arab's faith in God is strongly reflected in folktales passed down throughout the generations. In a large number of these tales, the hero is said to act according to God's will. For instance, a poor man accepts his poverty because it is his destiny decided by God. God may answer the wishes of good people, such as, granting a

child or bestowing wealth. In addition, God also punishes the evil characters that cause trouble for the protagonists.

It is interesting to note that although folk tales might include supernatural and magical elements, they are usually based on real life events that stem from the Arab culture. For instance, social values, such as, courage and honesty are often preserved in the legends and folk tales. Imagination and creativity in these tales add to their beauty and entertaining capacity without minimizing the influence of real life events.

The Arabic folk tales have many features. These folk tales display the social structures of the community and values of the Arabian community. The prominent feature of the Arabian folk tales is the position and roles of men and women in the Arab society. The faith in the presence of the Almighty is usually expressed through the male protagonist, who deploys his belief in the power of the Almighty and his own determination and skill to meet the challenges which come on way of the protagonist of the story to complete the mission. In these tales, the powerful kings or heroes are also depicted and the presence of the manifestations of the supernatural beings and the supernatural elements is a very significant and common component of most Arabic folk tales.

Most of the tales have a significant moral that teaches the reader the ethical values, basically the attribute to discriminate between the right and the wrong. Some of the most common morals in these Arabian folk tales are- tolerance which leads to success, satisfaction and adequate contentment which keep one out of menacing troubles and loyalty and loyal behaviour which is always rewarded. A thief particularly will be caught and discovered and later punished by the authorities. All these lessons through the medium of the Arabic folk tales are meant to enhance and rescue the set of values that

include Arab culture and make it unique and interesting to read and delve deep into the tales which arouse curiosity in the conscience and psyche of the reader and also educate them. The very famous Arabic folk tale collection is *The Arabian Nights.*

Arabic folk tales circulated orally for thousands of years are rooted in ancient and medieval culture and folklore with Egyptian, Persian, Indian, and Mesopotamian influences. When Arabic folk tales were first written down formally in the 14th century, they were contained in the Syrian Arabic manuscript. Some of the most famous Arabic folk tales are contained in *One Thousand and One Nights*, compiled during the Islamic Golden Age. The origins of the stories in this collection are complex. Iraqi influence is observed as added to the stories, and the original few stories can be traced back to India and Persia in the 8th century. They are a rare gem for the literary world.

The Arabian Nights is a collection of tales from the Islamic Golden Age, compiled by various authors over hundreds of years. Though each collection features different stories, they are all centered around the frame story of the Sultan Shahrayar and his wife, Scheherazade.

Hatim Stories is a book about the adventures of Hatimtai, the king of Yemen. Though these stories had been written long back, they remain popular even today, particularly among children. The qualities that inspire and fascinate people are kindness, generosity, etc. which are displayed by the hero of the story.

The tales themselves are filled with magic, charm, and romance which mark folk tales around the world. Young people fall in love at the first sight, clever men amass fortunes, mothers protect their young ones, wicked people are outsmarted, and the wise and religious are rewarded. The tales are filled with villains who capture the readers' imagination and are thwarted only by the clever, the witty and the brave. Animal tales,

humorous tales, and foolish tales, all have their place in the timeless Arabian folk tale collections. Children will be captivated by the stories and demand that they read and reread which should only delight the reader and enhances their cognitive perception as they are full of wit and wisdom and also give an insight in the rich tradition and cultural heritage of the particular country.

The folk tales also serve as an effective tool of entertainment along with educating the readers in instilling the moral and ethical code of conduct in the psyche of the readers and are enjoyed by all age groups. The hidden morals inside each tale, and the concocted ideas, make the folktales not only restricted to the children but also to adults and the old alike.

So far, a comparative study between the Indian and the Arabic classic literature has not been conducted. They have been studied in isolation rather than in reference to each other.

Literature Review reveals that many of the researches have focused on the genre of folk tales in the specific cultural context before but a comparative study between the Indian and the Arabic folktales has not yet been attempted. This research project also attempts to prove that folktales are not just rich in revealing the cultural and traditional heritage of a nation but it also serves as a tool to empower mankind with the moral and ethical perspective of life which is significant in developing a holistic personality of an individual.

For Instance, Manorma Jafa in the article entitled *The Panchtantra World's Oldest Collection of Short Stories for Children* has written about the *Panctantra* which is the oldest collection of stories for children in the world. She also tells that *Panctantra* is the first anthology of animal studies.

K.D. Upadhyaya in the article entitled *A General Survey of Folklore Activists in India* in the fifth *Midwest Folklore* series writes about the state and nature of folklore research in other parts of the world.

Evanghelia Stead in the article entitled *On Inefficient Arabian Nights tales: Theophile Gautiers, The Thousand and Second Night* talks about the hunchback's tale which is regarded as the narrative masterpiece of the oldest part of the *Arabian Nights*.

Anny Gaul in the journal entitled Shahrazad's Pharmacy: Women's Bodies of Knowledge in The Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies highlights that, at the first glance, a group of flowers purchased in *"The Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies*," a story cycle from *The Thousand and One Nights*, seems to function merely as a way to establish the tale's setting. This article suggests that the flowers, read in the context of Islamicate medical theory, popular medical tradition, and literary metaphor, enable a new re-reading of the story cycle and its ending.

Lenah Al-zahabe in the research paper entitled *Perception of Arabic Folktales by Readers from Different Language/ Cultural Background* investigates the perception of Arabic folk tales by readers from different language/ cultural backgrounds. The study analyzes whether a reader's language or cultural background affects the way how Arabic folk tales are perceived and understood, particularly focusing on where the comprehension difference appears between non-native speakers of Arabic and native speakers of Arabic, as well as where heritage speakers of Arabic speakers fall within the spectrum.

Srpko Lestaric in the article entitled *The Arabic Language and Folk Literature: A Call for Gathering and Translating the Arab Folk tales* highlights the translated

versions of the Arabic Folk Tales into English, German and Russian. The article also focuses on the importance of the colloquial language of the Arabic region.

Prema Srinavasan in the article entitled *Churning the Milky Oceans for Stories* discusses how A.K. Ramanujan has retold folk stories and chosen to include oral tales rather than literary texts in his book *Folk tales from India.*

I. Henrik Janne in the article entitled *The Buddhist Jataka Stories: An Analytical Survey of a few Jatakas and Their Use in Schools in the City of Benaras, Uttar Pradesh, India* demonstrates that the evolution of Buddhist ethics was conducted with an inductive empirical qualitative methodological orientation. It also tells that Buddhist *Jataka* Tales are a beneficial tool to be used in classrooms by teachers while teaching good lessons to children.

II. <u>The Objectives of the Study will be:</u>

1. To make an in-depth study about the origin of folklore, its manifestations, importance and purpose.
2. To make a critical study of the Indian and the Arabian folk tales.
3. To explore the contemporary Socio-Cultural milieus of the two countries.
4. To discuss the relevance of folk tales as a form of literature in modern times.
5. To analyze the cognitive development of the children through folk tales.
6. To attempt a comparative study of the Indian and the Arabic folk tales.

The Tentative Chapter division of the Study would be as follows:

Chapter 1: Folk tales: (a) Origin and Development. (b) Purpose and Significance in Literature.

Chapter 2: Critical Study of Indian Folk Tales and Their Teachings.

Chapter 3: Critical Study of Arabic Folk Tales and Their Ethical Values.

Chapter 4: Socio-Cultural Dynamics: Customs, Traditions and Communication Motifs of the Indian and the Arab Societies.

Chapter 5: Power of Folk Tales in Cognition.

Chapter 6: Conclusion.

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